



# the LAST LETTER

By Cleve Cartmill

THE ABDOMEN beneath his gloved fingers was a sea of blood, and Dr. Cyril Bronson probed with hands that were as steady and precise as his cold voice.

"Hemostat!"

Nurse Judith Ainsley slipped it into his hand.

"Heartbeat, eighty," the anaesthetist said.

Dr. Bronson continued his steady probing. Miss Ainsley watched with wide, dark eyes, her gloved hands

clenched above the tray of instruments. Dr. Bronson's assistant stood relaxed, but alert, ready to take over if Dr. Bronson should be forced to discontinue.

"Heartbeat, ninety-five," the anaesthetist said. His voice betrayed inner tension, his wrinkled forehead indicated growing concern.

"Scalpel!" Dr. Bronson snapped.

Miss Ainsley's hand was sure and swift, but her eyes opened wider. Her broad brow under the wide cap

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by

LEONARD ST. CLAIR



# of DR. BRONSON

was as white as the cap and as furrowed as the anaesthetist's.

"Heart beat, seventy-five."

Miss Ainsley drew in her breath sharply.

"Hemostat!" Dr. Bronson snapped.

"Here it is!" Miss Ainsley said through clenched teeth.

Dr. Bronson let a surprised glance flick sidewise at her. He applied the hemostat, and poised the scalpel to carve an abscess from the flesh of Barrett Sheffield.

"Heart beat fifty . . . six!" the

anaesthetist said in an urgent tone.

"Doctor!" Miss Ainsley's voice held sudden agony. "Do you think this is advisable?"

"Quiet, Nurse!" Dr. Bronson's voice was cold and harsh.

"But his dyspnea is more pronounced! Just listen! And he's turning blue! He's cyanotic! You—"

"Quiet!"

Dr. Bronson kept his eyes on his steady hand as it guided the sharp blade.

"He's going," the anaesthetist said

in a voice that suddenly had dull resignation in it.

"Oh, Doctor—" Miss Ainsley began in horror.

"Caffein," Dr. Bronson barked. "Quickly!"

"He's gone," the anaesthetist said softly.

"Stethoscope!"

Dr. Bronson applied it, listened intently, then sighed. He straightened up.

"Well, that's that."

Miss Ainsley caught a broken, sobbing breath and began to cry silently with her eyes wide open. The tears welled from her eyes and flowed down her cheeks into the gauze mask that hid the lower half of her face. She stood in a kind of frozen grief for a second before she dropped a word into the silence. It was spoken softly, broken by her silent sobbing, but it was like a great shout.

"M-murderer!"

Dr. Bronson turned to her, and his eyes were like blue glass marbles.

"Miss Ainsley," he said calmly, "what's the matter with you? You've been acting strangely all through this operation."

She stopped crying, and with hands clenched at her side she faced the doctor squarely. Though it couldn't be seen, the curl of her lip was in her voice as she went on.

"I warned you. You knew you shouldn't have gone ahead. You knew it, and yet you went on. It was murder!"

"Miss Ainsley—" Dr. Bronson broke in but her stream of bitter

words overflowed his interruption.

"Oh, I know you can't be prosecuted." The visible part of her face contorted into lines that spelled hatred as clearly as print. "Nobody can prosecute you, you can't be sent to the electric chair, but you'll go to your grave with murder marked up against you."

Dr. Bronson digested this in silence for a moment. The anaesthetist still remained near the head of the corpse, and the assistant held an attitude of arrested indecision. Then Dr. Bronson addressed her precisely, coldly, as if he were dictating a prescription.

"I shall see that you never again work in the operating room with me, Miss Ainsley. I shall attempt to forget your hysterical outburst, because of your record, but you have not conducted yourself as a nurse should. I can't see why it should upset you to see a patient die. You've seen that before, and even if the patient happened to be a famous and handsome actor, a professional attitude should be maintained."

"We already had the license, we were going to get married as soon as he was well again. That's why it—upset me, you . . . you . . ."

She suddenly caught up a scalpel and crouched like a hunting cat about to leap. The assistant gave a startled gasp, the anaesthetist half rose from his stool, but Dr. Bronson was motionless.

"I don't know which one of your crazy theories you were trying to prove with this operation," she snarled, "or whether you were try-

ing to settle a part of your feud with Dr. Mosher, but by God you ought to pay for your damned clumsiness."

She turned her furious eyes from the doctor to look at the shining blade in her hand. This act brought her an expression of surprise. She eyed the scalpel as if she had never seen it before. Then her arm was suddenly nerveless. It dropped, and the piece of steel rang against the floor.

Miss Ainsley turned and marched out of the operating room with its smells of death and iodoform, its floodlights which brought into harsh relief the four male bodies, three of whom began the unpleasant duties which are the aftermath of death.

DR. BRONSON scrubbed himself and dressed in a gray pinstripe suit, white shirt, blue tie, gray suede oxfords, a gray soft felt hat and tan pigskin gloves. He carried a tan topcoat over one arm and a silver-knobbed walking stick in the other hand. He walked briskly out of the hospital, flagged a taxi and told the driver to take him to the Hollywood State Bank.

He leaned back and stared at nothing. His strong, well-modeled face was relaxed for a few moments, but developed bunches of muscle over the hinges of his jaw bone as he clenched his teeth. His eyes, which matched the color of his tie, steadied on a spot somewhere in space, and he absently fingered his gray moustache at intervals as the cab driver cursed, rather than drove, a weaving

path through the Sunset Boulevard traffic.

At the bank, Dr. Bronson wrote a check to CASH for the sum of \$10,000. The cashier goggled a bit at the amount, but obeyed without question the dapper surgeon's request for twenty \$500 bills.

When he entered his office building, Dr. Bronson found himself in the elevator with a tall young man with a lean face that held a pair of permanently amused dark eyes.

"Hello, Mosher," Bronson said. "I was going to look you up. I want to talk to you."

"How odd," Dr. Mosher murmured.

They got out of the elevator together on the fourth floor, and Mosher entered Bronson's severely plain offices after bowing thanks for Bronson's holding the door for him. He took a comfortable chair at Bronson's invitation in the latter's private office. Dr. Bronson took off his hat and gloves. He sat behind his desk and looked coldly at his visitor.

"Mosher," he said, "you and I have had many differences of opinion in the past, as the whole medical profession knows. I feel as I have for some time, that you are a young man too enthusiastic over vistas which have suddenly been revealed to you through your studies. This article—"

Dr. Bronson picked up a small paper-bound book which bore the title *Psychiatry at Work*. "—is the final proof of my argument that you are an unlicked cub."

"Dear, dear," Dr. Mosher murmured.

"And I," Dr. Bronson continued, with animation creeping into his voice, "am going to show you why I think so. Murder is *not* inevitable under a given set of circumstances. You propose that certain basic motivations to murder—greed, jealousy, revenge, desire for power, fear—will inevitably result in homicide under given circumstances. I say flatly that you are wrong."

"It's an opinion," Dr. Mosher said, crossing his long legs.

"The human being," Dr. Bronson continued, "is motivated by a set of fairly simple basic emotions. But my whole argument is that if the original stimulus which arouses a certain emotion stems from a set of circumstances, then the resultant emotion can be cancelled or rendered static by reversing the original stimulus."

Dr. Mosher sat up. "Your statement sounds like most of the guarded statements doctors make. You don't say anything."

"Very well," Dr. Bronson said crisply. "I'll say something. You and I have disagreed publicly and privately to the point of violence. I am safe in saying that you don't like me?"

Dr. Mosher shrugged. "I wouldn't go that far. I just think you're an old fool."

Dr. Bronson colored, clenched his hands for a moment before he visibly forced himself to relax. He attempted a smile.

"In your opinion, I have been told, the world would be better off without me."

"Much," Dr. Mosher agreed pleasantly. "And a number of patients would still be alive if you hadn't operated on them." He shut off Bronson's protest with an admonitory finger. "I wouldn't say this before witnesses. Ethics, you know."

"Believe me," Dr. Bronson said angrily, "I hold the same contempt for you. You think you know everything, and the ink isn't dry on your diploma. But my point is that under a given set of circumstances, provided that no suspicion would fall on you, you would murder me?"

"Gladly, Doctor."

"I thought so. I say you're wrong. A psychological 'check' can be imposed in almost any given set of circumstances which involves basic—not psychotic—impulses. The compulsion to rid oneself of a danger is common to all men." He raised a finger. "But the psychological check, which I am sure I can apply to any situation of that nature, will render the killer harmless."

Dr. Mosher leaned back in the chair again and lighted a cigarette. He held this negligently in his long graceful fingers as his wide brow furrowed with thought.

He sighed. "This is a lot of double talk."

"Not at all," Dr. Bronson said affably. "Why wait to put it to the test? Why not now? I invite you to murder me. You have a basic motivation, hatred, which I return to you a hundred fold."

Dr. Mosher got up on his long legs. "You're insane, as I've always suspected." He moved toward the

door.

"Wait, Mosher!"

The words halted Mosher.

"Well?"

Dr. Bronson's face remained unperturbed. "It can be arranged so that no suspicion of murder will attach to you. I shall write a suicide note. Here is a revolver. And here —" He took from his pocket the thin sheaf of \$500 bills. "—is ten thousand dollars which you may have. I shall account for the disposition of this money in my note. Nobody saw you come in here, and you could leave unseen by that door. The gun is of small caliber, and will make a small sound. This money would help you out of certain financial difficulties I happen to know about. What do you say?"

Dr. Mosher turned back from the door.

"Well," he said, "this is beginning to be interesting. Tell me more."

"Sit down," Dr. Bronson said.

Dr. Mosher did, crossing his legs again, drooping graceful hands over the ends of the arm rests of the chair.

"My proposition," Dr. Bronson said, "is simply stated. I want to die. This heart condition, I have you are familiar with. I know that eventual and inevitable death will bring pain which I wish to avoid. Cardiac functions cease quickly when a bullet tears vital tissues."

"Write your note," Dr. Mosher broke in. "This is going to be a pleasant assignment."

Dr. Bronson smiled thinly, and

began to write in a script that was as precise and clear as his voice:

*"To whom it may concern:*

*I am taking my own life for a number of correlated reasons.*

- 1. I have an incurable heart condition, and I do not desire to wait for the inevitable.*
- 2. My research into the field of psychiatry has been halted because of the stubbornness of my colleague, Dr. Byron Mosher. He could have helped me at a number of crises, but he chose not to do so because of personal feelings.*

*(a) Dr. Mosher has sworn himself to be my enemy, and has been singularly lacking in cooperation.*

*(b) Nonetheless, I leave to him my practice and my notes on the research I have been conducting.*

- 3. My final wish is that this research should go forward, and my sorrow is that I have not had the necessary cooperation which would have made it successful.*

*(signed)*

*Dr. Cyril Bronson.*

After he had finished, Dr. Bronson handed the note to Dr. Mosher. That young man read it, and his expression of amused contempt grew as he read. He handed it back when he had finished it. He got to his feet.

"Oh, no you don't, doctor," he said. "You've made a martyr of your-

self, and I won't buy it. I hope you die in the ignominy and anonymity you deserve."

Dr. Bronson smiled smugly.

"You see what I mean? You were ready to kill me. But I applied the single 'check' in my note which would deter you. This disproves your whole argument in this particular case. The motive for murder was there. The chances of escape from prosecution were high. Yet you refuse to kill me for psychological reasons. And I say this circumstance can be repeated under other so-called given circumstances. When I have finished my research I shall publish an article showing you up for the charlatan you are. Good bye, doctor."

DR. BRONSON went into the church. He felt that it was good to make these Sunday pilgrimages to what he regarded as a shrine to superstition: many of his wealthier patients were devout, and a certain appearance of religiousness—even if it conflicted with the scientific attitude—was good for the bank roll. He sprinkled himself with holy water, genuflected at the top of the nave, and took his seat. He relaxed as he watched the colorful pageantry and paid little heed to the sermon.

When it was over he joined the throng which flowed out into the murky afternoon. As he walked toward his parked car, he felt a touch on his arm.

"Dr. Bronson."

Dr. Bronson turned and looked into the face of Edward Totten. The

doctor's features arranged themselves into an expression of polite, if bored, interest. This clerk, with his horse face and squirrel teeth, was a worrier.

"Yes, Mr. Totten?"

"Dr. Bronson, I got to talk to you. Could we go somewhere?"

Dr. Bronson narrowed his blue eyes in thought. He pictured Totten's wife, in her backless hospital gown, being prepared for tomorrow's operation. It was a serious operation, and Totten had cause for worry. He pictured Totten at his job, an underpaid clerk in an insurance office.

"Let's go to my office," Dr. Bronson said, "No one will be there, and we shall not be observed."

Totten worked his teeth in the manner of a squirrel hulling a nut. "Observed?" he said shrilly.

"I want to talk to you confidentially," Dr. Bronson said, and led the way to his car. As he drove along Hollywood Boulevard, he shot side-wise glances at Edward Totten. That individual gnawed at his lower lip. He clasped and unclasped his hands. Dr. Bronson smiled grimly to himself.

"Let me say, Mr. Totten, that your wife will pull through, in my opinion. After all, it's a simple operation."

"Thank God for those words!" Totten exclaimed. "I must admit that I have been extremely worried, what with my financial situation and all."

"Precisely," Dr. Bronson said, "what I want to talk to you about."

He parked in front of his office building, noted carefully that no-

body was near enough to record the fact that two men were entering, and led the way. The elevators were inactive on Sunday, and they walked up the four flights. When Totten was seated, still wringing his bony hands, Dr. Bronson took his place behind his desk and smiled.

"This is rather embarrassing to me," he said.

"God recognizes no embarrassment when the truth is said," Edward Totten said.

"Exactly the way I feel," Dr. Bronson agreed. "I'm glad you share my feeling."

"I have told my wife any number of times, Doctor, that it's a great comfort to be with you on Sundays."

Dr. Bronson made a deprecating gesture. "Oh, come now, Mr. Totten, you embarrass me."

"No, I mean it," Totten said earnestly. "In the world today, too many people feel that they no longer need their God."

"Yes," Dr. Bronson said unctuously, "their lives are void of the rich treasure *you* have in your faith."

"The church is a great comfort to me, And we do need something to cling to in times like these."

Dr. Bronson didn't answer. He drummed on his desk for several seconds, and fingered his gray moustache. He presently turned his blue eyes on Totten.

"Totten, uh, you could make rather good use of, say, ten thousand dollars, couldn't you?"

Totten drew himself up. "It isn't like you, Doctor, to make fun of my circumstances," he said in injured

tones.

"I am quite sincere," Dr. Bronson said.

"You know what even a hundred dollars would mean to me," Totten said. "I can't save anything on my salary, and now with Ernestine in the hospital . . ."

"Exactly. Well, Totten, I can show you how you can get ten thousand dollars and render a Christian service at the same time."

Totten leaned forward, his dark eyes alight with hope. His voice, however, reflected the hopelessness of the clerk in a job which would never be any better, never pay more.

"Don't torture me, Dr. Bronson."

"It is not my intention to do so, Mr. Totten." He unlocked his desk and took out the sheaf of bills. "Here are ten thousand dollars, and they will be yours if you will do me a slight service."

Totten's eyes bulged at sight of the currency. His knuckles turned white as he clenched his hands together.

"What could I do for you that would be worth all that money?" he asked in trembling voice.

Dr. Bronson did not answer instantly. He appeared to consider the circumstances gravely, carefully, in the manner of a man who will not speak until he knows definitely what he will say.

"My doctor called on me yesterday," he said carefully. "My doctor is a man renowned the world over as an expert in mental disorders. He had collected considerable data on my case, and he informed me that

I was going mad."

"Doctor!" Totten cried. "I'm sorry to—" he paused, and his eyes widened. "But you're supposed to operate on Ernestine..."

His voice trailed off into an unhappy silence, and he stared fearfully at Dr. Bronson.

Dr. Bronson smiled slowly but widely. "I am quite all right at present. Don't worry about tomorrow. It's the future that holds such dreadfully dark—have you ever watched a man go mad?"

Totten gulped. "No."

"It isn't a pleasant experience, take it from one who knows," Dr. Bronson said significantly. "And I imagine, more clearly than you can comprehend, that it is less pleasant to the patient. To realize that you are losing those functions of thought which characterize you as a reasonable human being, able to mingle with your fellow men on common ground, and know that there is nothing you can do to—"

"Stop!" Totten shuddered. "It's a horrible idea."

"It has been my feeling for some time," Dr. Bronson went on inexorably, "that the best thing one could do for such a person would be to save him that inner agony by—" He stopped abruptly, paused, then shrugged. "—by helping in any way possible."

"I believe you," Totten said in an agitated voice, two or three tones higher than normal. "But what can I do?"

Dr. Bronson seemed to ignore the question. He looked off into space,

and took his time answering. When he spoke, it was in reminiscent tones.

"I have had a good life. I went to medical school, I fell in and out of love, and I have prospered as a doctor. I hate to see it end. But—" He turned fiercely to Edward Totten and snarled his words: "—I hate worse to see it end in a padded cell, where my screams will be silenced in warm baths and I shall never remember having screamed. I'll hate those periods of aberration which I can never recall to mind, those outbursts which bring to the eyes of my keepers a wary heartiness, an alert friendliness. I'll hate the strait-jackets which will bind my arms and render me harmless. I'll—" He put his face in his hands and groaned. "*Oh, my God!*"

Edward Totten wrung his hands and looked at the doctor with agonized eyes. He opened his mouth several times to speak, then draped his squirrel teeth with his upper lip. Presently, Dr. Bronson raised his head.

"I'm sorry for all this emotionalism," he said calmly, precisely. "It catches up with me now and then. Now listen to my proposition."

He got up and went to a cabinet, the shelves of which were lined with small labeled bottles. He scanned them and picked out a squat brown bottle filled with a white powder. He took a glass from the shelf, sifted a half teaspoonful of the powder into it, then filled it with water. He carried this back to his desk, and wrote briefly on a sheet of scratch

paper. When he had finished, he replaced his fountain pen in the breast pocket of his coat and looked steadily at Totten.

"I have tried this before," he said, indicating the glass. "I have tried to kill myself, but I haven't the moral strength. I would drink this if I had some help, and die instantly, and thus save myself those terrors of the disintegrating mind."

Totten's features showed outrage. "What are you talking about?"

Dr. Bronson took a pair of rubber gloves from his desk. "Take these," he said. "Put them on."

"But why?" Totten demanded, not moving from his chair.

"Do as I say!" Dr. Bronson commanded harshly, and Edward Totten, in the manner of a desk accustomed to obeying orders, obeyed.

When he had the gloves on his knobbed hands, Totten looked at Dr. Bronson with apprehension in his wide, dark eyes. "But why?" he said again.

"This glass," Dr. Bronson said with urgent excitement, "has a lethal portion of cyanide of potassium in it. Watch me." He picked the glass up in his hand, impressing his fingerprints on it with careful precision. "There shall be no question as to who did this deed. All you have to do is lift this glass to my mouth."

"As I said, I haven't the moral courage to do it myself. But if somebody is here with me, I know I can drink it. I shall die within a very few moments. You need not stay and watch. If you're seen leaving, it won't matter. This suicide

note will explain everything. And you can take the ten thousand with you." He touched the stack of bills with a finger.

Edward Totten eyed the fortune with longing, with a hint of avarice. His dark eyes gleamed, and his squirrel teeth worried at his underlip.

"It's a Christian act," Dr. Bronson urged. "I'm going mad anyway. You can't, you simply *can't* allow me to suffer the way I must. Think of your wife, man! If she were going to die a slow and painful death—which she is not, thank God—wouldn't it be an act of Christian charity to put her out of her misery?"

"Well," Totten said aimlessly, his eyes on the bills.

"Exactly," Dr. Bronson said crisply. "Well?"

"All right," Totten said reluctantly, "I'll do it. Quick, give me the glass."

He leaned across Dr. Bronson's desk and gingerly took the glass in a gloved hand. "Quick!" he almost shouted.

Dr. Bronson leaned back in his chair. "One moment. I want you to be certain that no suspicion of taking a human life will fall on you. Let me read you the note. He picked up the sheet of paper, and read slowly, significantly: "I, Dr. Cyril Bronson, am taking my own life because of reasons best known to me. I realize that this is a sin in the eyes of the church, but am fully prepared to suffer the consequences which will undoubtedly be imposed



upon me throughout Eternity. I am willing to face my Maker on the Day of Judgement, knowing full well that my soul will be banished to nether regions and eternal torture for the crime of murder—the murder of myself. *Ave!*”

Edward Totten set down the glass suddenly as if it were hot. He jerked his hand away from it, and his eyes were wild and staring.

“God forgive me,” he muttered. “I didn’t know what I was doing. I’ll be punished for this, I’ll be . . . *Oh, my God!*”

He turned suddenly and ran from the office, still wearing the rubber gloves. Dr. Bronson smiled thinly at the door closing slowly against the air pressure of its brass cylinder.

“And that,” Dr. Bronson said, “makes two. Yours, my dear uninformed Mosher, and Totten. Two perfectly good basic motives: hatred and love—love for his wife and for humanity, in Totten’s case, hatred of me in yours. The psychological ‘check’ in each case was carefully contrived by me.”

“You’ll get yourself killed, Bronson,” Dr. Mosher said sardonically. “I hope.”

JUDITH AINSLEY got off the street car, looked right for traffic, and crossed to the sidewalk. She stood there for a moment, frowning abstractly while pedestrians moved along in solid opposite streams. She did not see the obese man who came up behind her and touched her on the arm.

“Hello, Miss Ainsley,” he said softly. “Haven’t seen you in a long time, not since the clinic.”

She turned to look into his apple face with its Poland-China jowls and tiny black eyes. She caught her breath, then smiled.

“Oh, hello, there! How are you?”

He shrugged his rounded shoulders. “Still got it.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

He shrugged again. “Oh, what the hell. I stay away from accidents, or don’t look. Well . . . see you.”

“Goodbye,” she said, and watched him waddle off down the street.

She glanced at her watch, and entered the office building, her neat blue-suited figure drawing admiring glances.

“Four,” she said, wedging herself into the elevator.

She walked down the corridor and entered the frosted door which bore a gold legend in chaste lettering: “DR. CYRIL BRONSON, M.D.” She raised her dark brows in surprise when she saw the reception room was empty, and knocked on the inner door.

Dr. Bronson, in his usual gray suit and blue tie, opened it immediately.

“Come in, Nurse.”

She obeyed, and sat in the large chair at his waved invitation. Dr. Bronson took his customary seat behind his desk, and looked at her with cold expressionless eyes. He fingered one end of his moustache for a few seconds before he spoke:

“I asked you here, Miss Ainsley,” he said carefully, “because I’m

sorry.”

“For me?” she asked skeptically.

“Not . . . exactly. I have been casting back in my memory, bringing to mind the details of that operation on Barrett Sheffield, and I have admitted to myself that if I had listened to you, he might be alive today.” He held up a cautionary finger. “Might, I say. It’s so hard to know.”

“It’s easy to be a Monday morning quarterback,” Miss Ainsley said coldly, her eyes like dark glass, her full mouth tilted in contempt.

“I don’t mean to be,” Dr. Bronson said quickly. “And the deed is done, in any case. My attitude is that some compensation should accrue to you.”

“What?” she asked bitterly. “Pressed flowers in my memory book?”

“Not at all. Ten thousand dollars.”

Her mouth did not relax, her eyes lost none of their hardness.

“Go on,” she said.

“I have written a letter,” he went on. “Let me read it to you.” He picked up a sheet of paper, cleared his throat, shot a glance at Miss Ainsley, and began: “To whom it may concern: In the event that my heart condition should become fatally active, I hereby bequeath to Nurse Judith Ainsley the sum of ten thousand dollars, which will be found in the lower right hand drawer of my desk. This is in partial repayment for the mental agony I have caused her.”

He stopped, looked at the piece of paper in his hand. He did not look

at Miss Ainsley.

She said: “And that’s all?”

He said: “Should there be more?”

She said: “Well, frankly, I would like to see you die, but without my name being brought into it.”

Dr. Bronson thought about this. “Well,” he mused, “I suppose that could be arranged, by writing another letter. How about this? I shall write another message.” He picked up another sheet of paper and read as he wrote:

“I am going to kill myself. I have been digitalized because of my heart condition, and I have decided that this condition is hopeless. One injection of calcium glutenate will accomplish my purpose.”

“Is that all right?” he asked.

Miss Ainsley got up out of the chair and walked about the floor of the office.

She put her hands together. “You mean,” she said, “that you want me to kill you.”

“Exactly.”

“You have a solution of calcium glutenate here. All I need to do is give you an injection, and your heart would stop.”

“Exactly.”

“And I could take this ten thousand dollars? Which I haven’t seen yet.”

“Here it is,” Dr. Bronson said, reaching into his desk. “All you have to do is give me the injection, take the money, and go.”

He laid the bills on the desk.

“Calcium glutenate, eh?” Nurse Ainsley said, pacing the floor. “I don’t think you’ve looked at this

from my viewpoint, doctor."

"Eh?" Doctor Bronson said.

"No. You see, I'm a nurse. In order to become a nurse, you must subscribe to certain rules of ethics. And you must really abide by them." She shot a shrewd glance at him through narrowed lids.

"I know," she said. "This is part of your feud with Dr. Mosher!" She waited for him to refute this.

He didn't. He looked at her calmly, dispassionately.

"Your getting or not getting ten thousand dollars," he said, "has nothing to do with ethics or professional disagreements."

"Well, then," she said, coming close to his desk, "I'll do it. Where's the needle?"

He waved a hand. "In my cabinet."

She found the needle, the solution. She placed a needle in the syringe clamp, pulled back the plunger after she had put the tip in the brown-bottled solution. She pointed the needle at the ceiling, pushed the plunger until liquid flowed out of the point, then laughed nervously.

"Why should I care," she said, "if you have an air bubble in your veins? If you're going to die, anyway." She looked at Dr. Bronson for a moment. "Only you're not," she said.

"Oh?"

"No. I think you're a bungling fool, and a second rate surgeon, but I'm not going to kill you. I've been trained to save, not to take, lives. Sorry. Frankly, the hell with you. I hope your death is painful. I almost

got sucked in on your pitch."

Dr. Bronson cupped his chin in one hand, elbow on his desk.

"I don't understand," he said.

She put the needle on his desk. "If you want to kill yourself, that's your problem. Not mine. Remember me? I'm a nurse. I don't want to be sentimental about it, but a nurse learns early in her training that her main function in life is to save. I've been so thoroughly conditioned on that point I can't do anything else."

"You hate me, yet you won't kill me," Dr. Bronson mused.

"For two reasons," she answered pleasantly. "I don't mind killing flies, or Black Widows, or rattlesnakes that are a threat to my comfort. But you're not, you see. You're no threat to my welfare. I could use the ten thousand, all right, but I'd feel I'd betrayed everything I've been taught, everything I've worked for. No, thank you. I wish you many agonies, Dr. Bronson. Good day."

She went out, and as the door closed slowly against the air cylinder Dr. Bronson smiled thinly again.

Dr. Mosher began to laugh. "God, if there is a God, takes care of fools, drunks, and children. You're not drunk, Bronson, and your age sticks out all over."

Dr. Bronson bristled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that old saw that digitalis in the presence of calcium is fatal in a heart condition. Completely stupid, not true, old hat, and superstitious." He paused a moment, then added: "And typical of you."

"If I were your age, Mosher, I'd thrash you," Dr. Bronson said harshly.

"If you were my age, I'd like to have you try, Doctor."

"At any rate," Bronson said smugly, "I proved my point again. I applied the psychological check at the psychological moment."

"Not when there wasn't any risk," Mosher taunted. "It doesn't prove a damned thing. Why don't you take a real risk?"

"The risk *was* real. Are you trying to discount the other two occasions? One, your refusal to make what you chose to call a martyr of me; two, Totten's inability to take a human life on religious grounds. Those were real. And so was this, with Nurse Ainsley. Calcium gluconate is fatal in conjunction with digitalis."

"Hogwash."

"My thesis that a psychological check will nullify the stimulus to murder has been proved so far, under real conditions."

"Okay," Mosher said amiably. "But you'll guess wrong one of these times, and somebody'll kill you."

MATTHEW DOYLE did what he was told—provided there was money in it. He was regarded as a good man with a gun, and a good man in a brawl. He was big, with red hair that curled at his collar when he went too long without a haircut.

On this particular night he was sauntering along Harold Way toward Henry's floating crap game, with four

hundred dollars in his pants and a gun in his armpit. It was a balmy night, lighted by searchlights and the reflected glow of Hollywood's nocturnal decor. He paid no attention to the rattle-fendered roadster that crept along the street with a strangely silent motor.

The roadster swerved into the curb with a sudden roar, and flame darted from its side. These yellow-orange jets, if carried to their calculated end, would have seared the vest of Matt Doyle. But the shooting of a pistol from a moving car is a process that gives the target a certain edge, particularly when the target is moving, and given to quick reflexes.

Matt Doyle's reflexes were quick, and he flung himself face down after the second shot and lay still while the roadster roared away.

The first bullet had taken effect, however, and his arm began to spout blood. He got to his feet and stood on the dark sidewalk, swaying from shock and becoming weaker from the rhythmic loss of blood that pulsed down his left arm. He had his own gun out before the roadster reached the next corner, but pain and surprise caused him to lower it after it wavered on the speeding car.

Then he just stood, looking foolish, until the dapper man approached him.

"Are you hurt?" the man asked.

"Guess I got hit," Matt muttered.

"I'm a doctor," the man said.

"Doctor Bronson. Let's have a look."

"The sons of bitches," Matt muttered, as the doctor stripped off his jacket and rolled up his shirt sleeve.

"You belong in a hospital," Dr. Bronson said.

"Never mind me," Doyle said harshly. "Go on away!"

"But you'll die, man!"

"Get the hell outa here!" Doyle snarled. "I'll take care of myself."

"But you can't. Here, let me apply a tourniquet, to keep you from bleeding to death. I'll use my shoe string."

Dr. Bronson made an emergency tourniquet, and the flow of blood stopped. "Now, come on. My office is only two blocks from here. You need medical attention."

"I don't want no doc," Doyle said. "You gotta report this."

"Not I," Dr. Bronson said. "I won't tell the police. Come on."

"Wait a minute, Doc," Doyle said. "How much is this gonna cost?"

"What difference does it make?" Dr. Bronson grated. "You'll die, if I don't sew up that artery."

"Okay, Doc, let's go."

"Put your jacket on," Dr. Bronson said. "You don't want people looking at you."

"Say, you're not a bad guy, Doc," Doyle said with the hint of a chuckle, "for a little guy."

Dr. Bronson piloted the big man to his office, laid him on an operating table, and did a quick and expert job of patching him together. During the operation Doyle lost consciousness from loss of blood. Dr. Bronson took his gun away, called an ambulance, and had the patient ensconced in a hospital bed, where he visited him next day.

"How do you feel?"

"Okay, Doc," Doyle said weakly. "Kinda shaky."

"You almost died. That will be all for the moment, Nurse," he said to the blue-eyed young thing in starched linen. "I'll call you. Now, young man," he said, when she was gone and they were alone in the room. "What do we do?"

"What do you wanta do, Doc?"

Dr. Bronson thought for a moment, noticing how red hairs sprouted from the backs of his patient's large hands.

"I want to protect you as much as possible, but there are certain legal matters which a doctor must take into consideration. The bullet didn't hit a bone, and passed on through. The wound might have been caused by anything. I can make my report out in any fashion I choose."

"All right, Doc. You get the edge. How much?"

Bronson gestured impatiently with his shoulders. "I'm not worried about money. You can pay for the room. As for the rest, I want you to do me a favor."

Doyle's gray-blue eyes were wary. "What kind?"

"I'll tell you when you can report to my office, which should be no later than the day after tomorrow."

The doctor's estimate was correct. Doyle showed up by appointment after Bronson's office girl had gone, his left arm in a sling.

"Sit down," Bronson said. "Here." He jabbed a thermometer into Doyle's mouth. He timed it for two and a half minutes, took

a reading, and sat behind his desk.

"You'll be all right, Doyle. Your temperature is normal. How's the arm?"

"Sore. But you seem to of done a good job, Doc. I'll be able to take care of them guys in a few days."

Dr. Bronson said casually: "You'd like to make some money, Doyle?" He fumbled in his desk. "By the way, here's your gun. I thought it would be better not to take it into the hospital."

Doyle took it and tried to strap it under his arm with one hand.

"Couldja help me, Doc?"

"Certainly." Dr. Bronson got up, and the gun was soon in its proper place. Doyle shrugged it into the most comfortable position.

"Now, Doc, whadda you mean, money?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

Doyle didn't change expression beyond raising sandy eyebrows. "That's dough, all right," he admitted. "Who do I bump off?"

Dr. Bronson was quiet for a long moment before he said:

"Me."

Doyle raised his eyebrows even farther. "Yeh?" he said. "How come?"

"I have an incurable disease," Dr. Bronson said smoothly. "I am going to die of it one of these days. I don't look forward to the long-drawn-out pain that will come when it happens. I want to get out of it now. You'll be doing me a favor."

He reached into his desk again. He pulled out a .45 caliber automatic.

"You're familiar with this type of gun, I take it?"

Doyle snorted. "Familiar? Say, what is this? Are you on the level, or am I nuts?"

"I'm on the level, Doyle," Dr. Bronson said calmly. "And here's the money." From the lower right-hand drawer he took the sheaf of \$500 bills, fanned them out on his desk. "My fingerprints are on the gun stock. All you have to do is stick it against my head and pull the trigger. I'll give you a glove to put on—even pull it on for you, since you'd have to use your teeth otherwise. Then you pick up the money and leave. Nobody knows you're here."

Matt Doyle took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, shook one out and clamped it with a finger while he caught it in his mouth. He tried to light a book match with one hand, holding the book between his elbow and the chair arm, but couldn't manage it. By the time he had rolled his eyes with an appeal for help in them, Dr. Bronson was beside him with a lighter.

"Thanks," Doyle said, sucking in the flame. "Now, Doc, the way I get it is this. You want me to knock you off, and you got ten grand to pay for it. Nobody seen me come in, I'll take care nobody sees me go out. The building's practically empty now, an' traffic's heavy. The sound of a shot wouldn't be noticed, most likely. Right?"

"Right, except for one thing."

Doyle's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Here it comes," he said with a twisted smile.



"You mistake me," Dr. Bronson said precisely. "The final condition is that I shall write a farewell note, saying that of my own free will I am taking my own life. Wait, and I'll read it to you."

He took his desk pen from its onyx container, a letterhead with his own name in chaste engraving at the top, and wrote:

"I have finally come to the conclusion that it is better to die quickly than slowly, in pain. My only consolation is that I have been able to save the lives of hundreds who would otherwise have died in loneliness or unhappiness."

He read this aloud to Doyle, who squinted his eyes through smoke as he listened. When Dr. Bronson had finished, Doyle said:

"Where's that glove, Doc?"

Dr. Bronson took a rubber glove from his desk. "I want you to understand exactly what you're doing, Doyle. Without any justifiable cause, merely for the sake of money, you are going to *murder* me. Understand?"

"Sure, sure. Help me with this glove, will you, Doc?"

Dr. Bronson got up, and pulled the glove over Doyle's hand, with its thickets of red hairs.

"You've been hired to do this sort of thing before?"

"Well," Doyle said, flexing his fingers. "Yeah, kinda. Say, this glove is kinda tight, Doc. Don't guess it matters, though."

Dr. Bronson sat behind his desk again. "But you've never killed a friend before?"

Doyle looked surprised. "Funny, I never thought of it that way. They was pals till they got in the boss' way. But when he tells me to slip it to 'em—well, hell, a guy's gotta make a livin' some way. But I never thought about this gag. I mean—"

He trailed off into silence, and furrowed his narrow brow as he looked at the wall. He shrugged his great shoulders, shook his head like a cinnamon bear. "Hell, I don't know. You . . . well, I guess . . . I . . . can't do it, Doc."

"What's the matter?" Dr. Bronson asked in an outraged voice. "Scared?"

"Ah, shaddap," Doyle snarled. "I'm not afraid of anything that can move. No, it ain't that, Doc. It's just that . . . hell, you saved my life, like you said in that there note. I'd a-died in whatchumacallit, misery or lonesomeness, or whatever it was. Bled to death all over the sidewalk."

"When a cat has fits, you put it out of its misery," Dr. Bronson said urgently. "When a pal gets in your boss' way, you knock him off. Why not me?"

"You didn't squeal to the cops, one reason, Doc. An' you saved my life. Nobody ever tried to before. Mostly somebody was always tryin' to chalk me off."

"I wish you could help me," Dr. Bronson said wistfully.

"Me, too, Doc, but it's just no go."

Dr. Mosher lifted his drink. "You're just lucky."

Dr. Bronson crooked a finger at

the waiter. "You may begin serving dinner." He swung a glance around the linen and silver dining room, with its hushed clatter and crystal chandeliers. To Mosher, he said: "Luck is superstition, pure and simple. The scientific mind doesn't recognize its existence. Don't talk like the fool you are."

"Me, I believe in luck," Dr. Mosher said. "My old man said he dropped his cigar in a flock of mud, and while he was cursing his luck, my mother bawled him out for his language. Result: me. That's luck."

"I'll admit," Bronson said, "the existence of imponderable situations, but mine doesn't fall into that category. The results are calculable. Take Doyle, for example. By playing on his sentimental streak, which almost all lawbreakers have of necessity, I forestalled his definite decision to kill me for the money."

"Just lucky, that's all," Mosher said. "You keep on, you'll wind up on a slab."

SOME weeks went by before Dr. Bronson performed his next experiment. Not that any number of possibilities hadn't presented themselves, but the individuals fell into categories already represented by Dr. Mosher, Edward Totten, Judith Ainsley, or Matt Doyle. He thought that the interests of science would not be served by repetition, and so had steered clear of these.

But as he was walking down Harold Way on this night, getting in a spot of exercise, a passing car almost ran over a dog. The scream of

tires, the driver's curses, and the dog's growls scrambled the quiet of the street, and caused one other incident.

The only other pedestrian on the doctor's side of the street, a fat man he had seen several times lately while out walking, fainted on the sidewalk. Dr. Bronson saw the man fall, and heard the ripe-pumpkin sound of his head as it hit the cement. The gray-suited doctor thought, as he hurried to the fallen man, that Harold Way was certainly producing more than its share of casualties these days.

He pried the man's eyelids open, felt his pulse, and waited. Finally the fallen man opened his eyes and said, "Where am I?"

"Just like the movies," Dr. Bronson said jovially. "You're all right now. Just shock."

A couple of residents came out to stand curiously by, one in his shirt sleeves, the other in white tie.

"He's all right," Dr. Bronson told them. "I'm a doctor."

The residents turned and went inside. Dr. Bronson looked at his patient. "What happened?"

"I thought that car—" The fat man broke off to giggle on a high, hysterical level. "—was going to kill that dog. I could just see the—" He giggled again. "—the blood. I always faint when I see blood. Can't help it. Funny, huh?"

"Many people feel that way," Dr. Bronson said. "Let me help you up."

He put his hands under the man's arm pits and assisted him to his small feet. Why, Dr. Bronson thought, does nature provide so many glandu-

lar cases with extra weight and nothing adequately to support it?"

The man stood swaying for a moment, then became steady. "Thanks, Doctor," he said. He giggled, and Dr. Bronson's back hair twitched. "I'm all right now."

"You'd better come to my office and let me examine you," Dr. Bronson said. "It's quite near."

"Well, if you think that's necessary."

"I do," Dr. Bronson said in a voice that did not conceal his inner excitement. "Believe me, I do." He led the way for a few feet, then took the fat man's elbow in one cupped hand.

When they were in his office, Dr. Bronson went over his patient carefully. "Aside from a lump on your head, which hasn't caused a concussion," he said heartily, "you're all right. What is your name?"

"Alphonse Ladourne, Doctor."

"Well, Mr. Ladourne, let's go into the next room. I have something I'd like to say to you."

Dr. Bronson took his accustomed place behind his desk. From the large bottom drawer he took a small instrument case, and from that a scalpel. He laid the sliver of shining steel on the polished mahogany, and smiled benignly at Ladourne, who had folded himself into the large chair.

Dr. Bronson looked at the man with a slight feeling of distaste which he had never been able to control in such cases. The jowls, the rolls of flesh at the wrists, the flabby ankles, the small eyes almost hidden

in flesh sacs, caused Dr. Bronson to feel a cold, tingling sensation along the back of his neck and down his spine.

"Mr. Ladourne," he said, "Are you a wealthy man?"

"Oh, no, sir," the fat man said pleasantly. "All I own, you see on my back, sir. I have a room in what I choose to call "A" Deck of the Good Ship *Duckworth*. My landlady's name."

"I see. Then may I be so personal as to ask if you could use ten thousand dollars?"

"You may, sir, you may. And I'm happy to answer with a strong affirmative. Does a drowning man reach for a rope? Will a starving man daydream of steaks?"

"I have seen you before," Dr. Bronson said carefully, "on my nightly walks. And I have noticed your pleasant face and thought to myself that you were a man who might help me. You see, I have a serious problem. Most serious."

"Glad to help if I can, sir," the fat man said amiably.

"It's just this," Dr. Bronson explained. "Candidly, I want you to kill me. In return for this service, I will pay you ten thousand dollars."

Dr. Bronson was expecting an expression of surprise, or a startled exclamation.

He was not prepared for the idiot giggle.

It ran high and thin, and Ladourne's chips quaked. Dr. Bronson shivered momentarily and waited for the chilling merriment to subside.

When it did, the fat man said:

"I'll do it gladly, sir."

"Good! I have carefully placed my fingerprints on this scalpel. I shall now write a short letter. I'll read it to you as I write." He took the fountain pen, and read each word as he put it on paper: "I find it impossible to continue. My chronic kidney condition has caused me so much pain that I have become a drug addict. The end is inevitable and painful. I have chosen this way out. I am sorry about the blood, but it can be cleaned up."

He raised his sharp blue eyes to the fat man as he read the last sentence, and was not surprised to see the expression of quick fright which overspread the stuffed-moon face.

Dr. Bronson took the sheaf of bills from the locked drawer and laid them on his desk. "This must be done quickly and forcefully," he said. "Just stick the blade into my neck . . . here, and draw it across my throat. That will sever the jugular, and I'll die in a few minutes. One thing, though, I must ask you."

"Ask away, sir."

"Do you fully understand that you, without provocation, are going to commit murder?"

"Oh, yes, sir." This was cheerful.

"I understand. It's lucky for you that you found me."

Dr. Bronson didn't like the tone. It was as casual as the greeting of passing strangers. "Eh?" he asked sharply. "Why?"

"I like to kill. It's . . . amusing."

"You've—killed before?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I shoot dogs."

Dr. Bronson's face began to take on a sickly yellow tinge. "Dogs?"

"They twitch." The fat man giggled again. "I'm a dead shot. Right through the head every time. It's . . . amusing."

"When do you do all this?" Dr. Bronson asked gingerly.

"Oh, about two or three in the mornings, when everybody's asleep. I pass by a house, and a dog runs out. Sometimes it growls, sometimes not. But always it stops. It's simple to shoot it between the eyes. And there isn't any blood. I use a twenty-two target pistol. It makes a tiny hole."

"But the noise."

"I have a silencer, sir." The fat man pulled a gun from his inside pocket, a silencer from another, and applied it. "No noise, you see? Just a teentsy pop." The fat man chuckled.

"You're mentally deranged," Dr. Bronson said, with overtones of horror.

"Oh, definitely. Psychotic as a coot. I shouldn't be allowed to run around loose, sir. One of these days they'll catch me at it and lock me up. Meanwhile, I amuse myself."

"But there'll be blood," Dr. Bronson said a trifle desperately, "when you cut my jugular. Gouts of it, spouts of it. It will get all over you."

Ladourne looked sick as he listened, but his reply was as cheerful as his account of his night adventures. "Oh, no, sir. I'm going to shoot you between the eyes. Then I'll turn my head away, so as not

to see whatever amount of blood there is. Besides, you'll probably fall behind the desk and I won't see you at all."

Dr. Bronson stood. "Put that gun away!" he said hoarsely.

The fat man giggled again and pointed the gun negligently. That was the last sound Dr. Bronson heard.

Nurse Judith Ainsley met La-

dourne again some months later, after the mystery of Dr. Bronson's death had been filed under "Unsolved."

"Oh, hello, there," she said. "How are you?"

"Just the same," he chuckled. "I want to thank you for putting me in touch with Dr. Bronson. He thought perhaps he could help me, but it turned out that he couldn't. He giggled softly. "It was most amusing."

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When Henry Daniell read the script of THE LAST LETTER OF DR. BRONSON, he said, "This is for me." Came then a series of conferences, arguments over interpretation of lines, and finally, rehearsal. Mr. Daniell was Dr. Bronson — sinister, affable, suave, cruel, intent on proving his point even if it killed him. As you know, he didn't and it did.

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## JUST PLAIN JANE

Little Jane, when only four  
Spiked her brother's milk with Chlor-  
ox. At the tender age of eight  
She beaned her Nannie with a plate.  
At thirteen, aiming slightly higher,  
She set her Grandpa's beard on fire.  
Grandpa died in some distress,  
But left a million, more or less. . . .

Jane, eighteen, and home from school,  
Pushed her father in the pool.  
Since he never learned to swim,  
This was very bad for him.  
Soon after, Mama's bucket kicked  
From mushrooms daughter Jane had picked.

No doubt you thought that Janie's hand  
Thereafter was in great demand,  
That hungry suitors by the score  
Battered their heads against her door.  
Alas, except in book and play,  
It doesn't always work that way;  
For Heiress Jane, though roundly heeled,  
Possessed (it now must be revealed)  
A too exotic type of pan  
To fascinate the normal man.  
She had, in fact, the kind of dial  
From which a wolf would run a mile.  
And the most highly paid masseurs  
Gave up before a shape like hers.  
No one was tempted to propose  
Except the seediest gigolos.

Jane spent the most part of her dough  
Upon Chihuahuas and chapeaux,  
And willed, before she passed away,  
The rest to the SPCA.

— Honest John